

WHAT SHOULD WOMEN STUDY?

BY J. SCOTT RUSSELL.

Appletons' Journal of Literature, Science and Art (1869-1876); May 29, 1869; 9; American Periodicals
pg. 276

WHAT SHOULD WOMEN STUDY?

By J. SCOTT RUSSELL.

HOME is an English word, an English thought; it is the place of the family; the fireside and the scene of family life, of family birth, growth, culture. English life grows and shines hidden, in the bosom of the family.

When, therefore, I speak of the occupation of a woman, I speak of her occupation in her sphere of "home administration." Man does his work abroad, without, in the world, in the crowd; woman's work is to organize, regulate, animate, illuminate home. There is her sphere, and in it she has work, duty, labor to do; industry, art, skill to exercise; intelligence, knowledge, to develop. Education is required, special in its object; training in arduous work, method in execution, technical education.

Woman's technical work is the organization and fulfilment of the duties of home life; and we must first examine the nature of these duties, before we can talk of the education and training they require.

The foundation of the home is marriage; the husband founds or finds the home; he brings his wife "home." He provides there shelter and comfort; and happiness is what he hopes always to find there. She has to make that. Henceforth his duties lie out of doors; hers lie indoors. He earns or gains their living abroad. He brings his earnings home weekly, monthly, yearly; that is his business. His wife's is, to spend that money—well, or ill?

The programme then of a woman's technical duty is simply this: How shall I spend my husband's earnings in our joint home, so as to make it yield him and us the best fruit? How shall I turn these hard-won earnings to best account?

"How to administer given earnings in the wisest, homely, household way"—that is a technical question, wanting some knowledge, teaching, training, education.

The money of a home has to provide for health, amusement, instruction. It has to provide fire, clothes, food, drink, music, reading, comeliness, knowledge, training, refinement.

Ought an English wife to know any thing about fuel or not? Should she know that there is good and bad coal?—that what is sold to her as best coal is oftener bad coal than good?—that bad coal produces smoke and flame and not heat, and that one wastes money

and the other uses it? Ought a woman to know this knowledge, or is it beneath her.

I must answer once for all, that I do not think any household knowledge of this sort is beneath any well-bred, well-born woman. When of two things you have to choose, whether you will do the better or the worse, it seems to me you have a grave responsibility. It seems to me, if you choose the worse, or don't choose, you are to blame. It seems to me, then, that a woman should know good coal from bad, or she may waste her husband's earnings. But next, if she buys only the best coal, comes the question: Is there a right way of using the coal and a wrong?

Ought an English wife to know how to use good coal; to use it to the purpose for which it is bought; to use it for light, cheerfulness, ventilation, warmth, cookery, cleanliness; or to use it to waste, smoke, discomfort? Is any knowledge necessary for that? Cannot anybody make a good fire?—keep a good fire, prevent smoke, maintain cheerful heat, warmth without waste?

Verily, there are few women who know this: the art to make, to maintain a good fire without excess, without waste, without smoke. Much science goes to understand a fire. 1. What is fuel made of? 2. What feeds the fire? 3. What wastes the fire? 4. What regulates the fire? 5. What makes flame? 6. What wastes heat? 7. What preserves and maintains heat? 8. What spreads it equally round a room? 9. What creates smoke, draughts, rheumatism, and colds?

It is not the work of a moment to understand and answer all these questions. A wise housekeeper should have asked them all, and got a good answer to each; that is one element of English home, health and comfort. Can every English housekeeper solve all this?

To feed her household well, agreeably, wholesomely, without stint, without waste—there is a technical problem of home life. What does each kind of food cost? What parts of food are the more wholesome, the more nutritious? What kinds of food do harm?—to the young, the middle-aged, the old? What quantity should be cooked, so as to give plenty without waste? What is the real value of each kind of food compared to its price? What is the price of food bought wholesale and bought at retail? What is the true weight of good kinds of food? How do I know good food from bad? How can I tell adulterated food from pure and wholesome food?

What are the wholesome ways of cookery? What kinds of cooking render wholesome food more or less nutritious, palatable? What dishes are comely, elegant, clumsy, gross, vulgar? How can I use the least sum of my husband's earnings in housekeeping, and yet never make him feel in want of any thing?

Shall I be told that all these things come by intuition, by experience, by practice? That they are for the servants to study, not for the mistress? That in every English household they are already perfectly well done? If I am assured that this is already known and done, I have only to admit, that no technical education in housekeeping is required by Englishwomen.

But I fear the truth is less pleasing; that many an Englishwoman sorely feels that that part of her education is at least not perfect. But I fear that many more Englishwomen and Englishmen do not know the truth about cookery and food. English food is often of the best materials in the world. English fuel is also of the best. English cookery, as a whole, is wasteful in the extreme, both of food and fuel. It is the fault of the Englishwoman; her want of technical education. She neither knows what is right, what is wrong, nor can she teach her servants what she herself is so ignorant of—the art of nutritious, wholesome, elegant, economical cookery.

Should the mother of a family know any thing about her own clothes—her husband's—her family's? What sort, quality, price of stuff, they should be made of? What stuffs wear well? what wash well? what wash out? Which parts wear out first? How to make these parts last the longest? What sewing holds? How many yards of stuff go to each piece of dress?—how much for lining, how much for trimming, how much for shaping, how much for sewing?

Should the head of a household know how to make any thing with her own hands—out of her own head? to cut out, to shape and fashion, to use a sewing-machine; to sew, embroider, mend? Should she know all about children's clothes, or nothing? Perhaps the Englishwoman we speak of may never want any of these knowledges; she is born above all these things. But may I ask: Is it of no use to

know thoroughly the things our servants have to do, or our shop-keepers? Should we not know when we are well served? when we are ill served? to distinguish between those who do well, and those who do ill; teach our inferiors, if they don't know; criticise their blunders, detect and correct their faults? Is it beneath the head of a household, to add to the pride of birth and the power of wealth, the excellence of superior intelligence and knowledge? Would it diminish your respect for a stately dame of a noble house, to know that she spared her husband's purse, and looked carefully after her own household? I know of a queen of ancient race, who taught her daughters to wash their own lace; for as she wisely said, "My dears, you never know what you may come to!" Was she a foolish or a wise mother?

All about clothes I think woman's work and woman's duty: price, stuff, shaping, sewing, durability, washing, ironing, and mending. A woman who cannot do all these things, and teach them to servants and daughters by example and precept, has not to my mind got a good technical education.

There is no such physician as a wise wife or mother. Not to cure disease: that is a doctor's work: but to prevent disease, or to stop it at starting. What are our gravest illnesses?—neglected colds, indigestions, headaches. Who first finds out that we are ill? Who knows what has caused our illness? Who first takes alarm? Why should not every wife know the early symptoms of disease, the cause, the cure? There—not by the sick-bed, or in the hospital, but there, by the family fireside, the kindly mother should wisely watch the first symptoms of disease, wisely give the early warning, wisely apply the simple cure. Which is better in the house, a wise wife, or a perpetual physician? There is no technical training so valuable to a woman as that which shall enable her both to keep the doctor out of the house, and to send for him the moment he is wanted.

The most important part of the Englishwoman's home duty is still to come. The character of the next generation of Englishmen and Englishwomen is to be of their mothers' forming. Nearly all the education that forms character is mother's teaching—home education, family training. School may modify, but cannot supersede this first apprenticeship to human life. The world may cover and obscure the marks of mother's breeding: that early growth can never be uprooted!

If, then, the mother's teaching founds the future character, sows the early seeds of feeling, plants the first roots of principle, settles the tendencies and aims of life, grounds habits, prunes error, weeds out follies, checks faults, develops hidden talent, encourages native energy to steady application, and makes good the weak places of the young human creature—what after-thought, and pains, and toil, and painful undoing and still more painful regret, may not a wise mother spare her children's lives! What glorious privileges may she not confer on these young human souls, making of them treasures for their friends, their home, their country, and their God?

All nature is a book—a child's book. Its mother is nature's best interpreter, if only she first knew!

A mother's teaching, home education, family training—what a wide field of mother's work—all a child should know, all *that* its mother should be able to teach!

I have spoken only of infancy, of the first six or seven years, when as yet the school is not, and the pedagogue has not entered on the scene. If the mother's work must now cease, how glad will she be if she has done it well, and how grateful her children ever after! But must it now cease? Can a mother after seven be of no more help to her boys or girls—teach them no more? Let the mother herself say: can she help her boys in the evening, or in the early morning, with their figures, their reading, their exercises?

For my part, I doubt much if girls blessed with such a mother need ever go to school, or could ever better themselves by it. I am quite sure that a man would far rather marry such a mother's girl than the best boarding-school miss of the most fashionable girls' school.

But even if mothers do not or cannot teach all their children all they should know, of how great advantage to initiate, to choose, to watch the education! What teachers would grow up under the inspection of well-taught mothers for the education of their well-prepared children! Thus every knowledge of the mother proves a treasure to her child.